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Experience of the Liverpool Middle School, Liverpool, New York, provides a rationale for organizing school systems to include ungraded middle schools. If, as evidence indicates, today's youth are maturing earlier, are more sophisticated, and are capable of greater accomplishment, then the traditional grade 7-8-9 arrangement does not meet the needs of ninth grade students while elementary schools can not meet the needs of sixth grade students. It is felt that grouping students by grades 6, 7, and 8 in the middle school aided solution of this problem. By introducing a multi-age grouping of students for each subject, each student's unique qualities and individual capabilities were recognized and given full educational advantage. This ungraded system required curriculum reform and flexible scheduling which were implemented along with a system of team teaching. Problems of team isolation, friction within teams, curriculum oriented outlooks, unwillingness to regroup students, and lack of evaluation of innovations were being solved. Progress made with the middle school concept indicates its viability. (TT)

How to Organize and Operate an Ungraded Middle School

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with a foreword by

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How to Organize and Operate an Ungraded Middle School

by Robert J. McCarthy

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Foreword

This monograph tells the story of how one school, The Liverpool Middle School, developed an organizational framework for educating young adolescents, aged 10-13 years. It begins with a frank admission of dissatisfaction with the status quo, proceeds through a detailed operational description of the why and the what of a new and better approach and ends with an optimism borne of being ready to meet the educational challenges of the future. Its most eloquent message lies in the willingness of a professional staff to alter its traditional attitudes and patterns of behavior in order to provide more viable learning experiences for its students. This story is for those educators who share with the Liverpool Middle School staff a willingness to do something to improve the educational opportunities of young adolescents.

Mr. McCarthy (who, incidentally, is the principal of the school) reports in a clear, meaningful manner what he and his staff did to create a middle school program. He carefully details the major components of the new organization for instruction and describes what each component means for the intellectual and social growth of the students.

The conceptual base for the Liverpool Middle program is founded upon the fusion of the "whole child" concept of the elementary school with the emphasis in the secondary school upon achievement in the subject matter areas. Operationally, the author contends, this fusion is best expressed through at least three major factors, 1) an ungraded approach, 2) interdisciplinary teaming of teachers and students, and 3) appropriate support systems for teaching and learning. The reader will, I am sure, welcome the detailed discussion of each of these factors presented by Mr. McCarthy. Of particular interest are those sections that deal with the organization of the interdisciplinary

teams, and the roles of the Instructional Consultant, and the Coordinator of Independent Study and Student Research. Those interested in developing this type of organization for instruction will find these sections most useful.

Implementing such an organization for instruction is no easy matter and the author himself points to some critical problems in this regard. One such problem, the ever present limitation of resources, finds its most lasting solution in the creative and dedicated ventures of the administrators and the teachers. Another problem, that of changing traditional modes of teaching behavior, is probably the most critical of all. Mr. McCarthy correctly points out that "the crutch of the syllabus has made a cripple of many a teacher . . ." The monograph describes several of the techniques used to overcome this problem in the Liverpool Middle School.

This monograph is more than just a report of "how-we-did-it-at-Liverpool." It describes a plan for an organization for instruction that is based on sound principles of teaching and learning. It points up problems and possible solutions that can be generalized to other areas. It provides a stimulus to others who may wish to engage in a similar venture. Most of all, it makes of the middle school concept more than just an interesting topic for debate. It should answer those who engage in useless arguments on the efficacy of the middle school for, after all, the middle school is a means and not an end, and its greatest contribution lies not in what it is called, but rather in what it does to enhance teaching and learning.

In our modern changing world more action and less polemics is called for in education. There is need for a complete commitment to changing traditional programs and creating more viable learning opportunities for our modern youth. The professional staff of the Liverpool Middle School has made this commitment and is making several significant moves to bring the program in line with the needs of the student.

Samuel Goldman, *Chairman, Area of Educational Administration, Supervision and Curriculum, Syracuse University*

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WHY AN UNGRADED MIDDLE SCHOOL

The classification of buildings as elementary, middle, and high schools would not be necessary if we could house all students, K-12, in one large building simultaneously. This would allow an ungraded approach to function in an ideal setting, enabling all students to make as rapid a progress as they could in any area.

This approach is currently being contemplated by several boards of education, and the notion of an "educational plaza" may become a reality in the near future. Since Liverpool cannot at present have this type of arrangement, it had to choose the next best solution.

A Middle School was badly needed because of what we know about today's youth. In this suburb of Syracuse, the junior high school approach did not seem to be as effective as it might be in reaching children in the 10 to 13 age bracket. Ninth graders seemed to be intellectually and socially alienated from the younger junior high school students, while sixth grade youngsters appeared to have much in common with seventh and eighth graders.

Changes in Maturation of Youth

From evidence gathered from numerous areas, it has been determined that today's youth are maturing earlier, are more sophisticated, and are capable of, and desirous of, accomplishing

far more than we have ever thought possible. Since the 7-8-9 arrangement could not meet the demands of our ninth grade pupils in regard to depth of science instruction in various areas, choices of foreign languages and pursuit of business courses, along with specialized courses in the other subject matter areas, it was decided to place these youngsters in a 9-10-11-12 high school situation, where they could hopefully progress unhampered by "artificial" grade barriers and curricular limitations.

It was also rather obvious that many of our elementary schools could not satisfy all the demands of our sixth grade pupils, particularly in science, industrial arts, home economics, foreign languages and physical education. Thus the decision was made to place sixth grade with seventh and eighth and to create the Middle School.

Our middle school has attempted to develop an organizational framework suited to the young adolescent. This necessitates combining much of the elementary school's concern for the "whole" child with that of the secondary school's emphasis on achievement in content areas. This is not an easy task, but it has been done to a degree not found in most junior high schools. Two factors that have helped us to accomplish this goal are an ungraded approach to grouping and instruction, combined with the interdisciplinary teaming of teachers and students. These two ingredients help guarantee the flexibility necessary to develop an individualized program for each student.

Why Ungraded

Parents know that each of their children is unique. Administrators and teachers have always recognized that every child comes to school with different backgrounds, experiences, interests, perceptions and abilities. But although very few will dispute this contention, little has been done to really organize our schools in such a way that each student will have a different program, one suited to the particular individual. Generally, the master schedule is built, and then we tend to fit the child to the program, rather than vice-versa. It appears as if this condition will prevail as long as we slavishly adhere to the graded or lockstep approach to education.

The graded theory

The graded system is based on the assumption that each child progresses at almost the same pace as other children of the same age. Following this line of reasoning, all students should profit from taking the same subjects, in a set order, year after year. But various forms of psychological testing, as well as the personal experiences of almost every teacher, have proven this assumption to be false. Youngsters learn in a variety of ways and in a variety of patterns, alternately spurting ahead and slowing down as their minds and bodies develop at different rates. If this is true, why the graded structure with all of its implications?

It must be recalled that the graded organization was initiated in response to the problems raised by an ever increasing school population. The one-room school-house, which was followed by the Lancastrian system with its monitor-teachers, was not able to cope with the vast numbers demanding to be educated. Since the ratio of students to teachers was rapidly increasing, the tutorial method was quickly disappearing, and the focus shifted from the individual to the group. At that time, the most obvious rationale for grouping was on the basis of age. The graded structure had thus solved one of the first administrative problems of massive education by neatly categorizing students and curriculum according to age and subject.

Just as the transition from the one-room schoolhouse, to the Lancastrian school, to the graded structure caused a great deal of controversy, we should expect a similar reaction as we move from a graded to a nongraded or ungraded structure. But realizing that much of today's organizational pattern is neither adequate nor fair to many of our students, we in Liverpool have decided to change, rather than perpetuate error by remaining with an outmoded "graded" system.

The ungraded concept

Once outside the school youngsters associate with children of all ages. They do so because of mutual interests and desires. However, immediately upon their entrance into our schools, these associations are broken up by artificial grade barriers. Although some teachers attempt to regroup within the various grades and

classes, the fragmentary "grade" organization makes this extremely difficult. Ungradedness adds that vital ingredient of flexibility needed to develop individual programs for students. It also helps to shatter the "definite age—prescribed curriculum" theory that has existed for decades.

Important: We feel that ungradedness is necessary if our schools are to meet the challenge of educating masses of children while at the same time providing the type of instructional program which enables each student to learn at his own rate and which takes into account each student's interests and abilities.

Our ungraded program attempts to form groups of students on the basis of their needs in various areas.

Example: A so-called 6th level youngster with a talent in the area of mathematics might find himself in a math class with the oldest students in the middle school, while still remaining with many of his own age group for some or all of his other subjects. The student then is placed with new groups as his or her progress dictates. This permits the teachers to regroup students constantly within their own team for various instructional purposes.

At this point it cannot be emphasized too strongly that the students will be studying English, Social Studies, Art, Music—and *not* 7th grade English, 6th grade Math and 8th grade Music. There is really no such thing as 6th, or 7th, or 8th grade English. It is only referred to in this way because it happens to be listed as such in a state syllabus or curriculum guideline. Unfortunately such neat categories as seventh grade math and eighth grade science have caused a fairly good percentage of teachers to focus on the curriculum appropriate for the grade level (whatever that means), instead of the program most appropriate for the individual student or groups of students. This is especially true of beginning teachers who feel that they need the security of a curriculum guideline or syllabus to tell them what to teach their classes. The crutch of the syllabus has made a cripple of many a teacher when, if used properly, it could have been a tremendous resource.

In an ungraded structure the student will study English or any other subject and progress as rapidly as he or she can along a logical pattern of development. Some may move through a sequence rather quickly, while others will need substantially more time. This approach will help to insure continuous progress for all and not periodic regressions because of pre-established curricular and grade level barriers. But to have this continuous progress you must have nongradedness.

In summation, it can be said that an ungraded approach recognizes that:

1. *Each child is different.*
2. *Each child can benefit from a program built especially for him.*
3. *Learning is an orderly process involving certain steps.*
4. *These steps must be taken one at a time, but the rapidity with which they are taken will vary with the individual.*

Using traditional state established syllabi as a guideline, a seventh level youngster entering our middle school might pursue the following program:

1. 7th level/8th level General Science
2. 8th level Mathematics
3. 6th level English
4. 7th level Social Studies
5. Introductory Industrial Arts
6. Spanish
7. Creative Art

The student will, in our ungraded, individualized program, be allowed to grow in many ways, according to the youngster's unique talents, abilities and interests, without the interference of the "grade" barrier. To enable him to make continuous progress in his educational development, the student will be guided by his counselor and his interdisciplinary instructional team.

Staffing the Ungraded Middle School

In order to completely understand all that has transpired during the first year of our middle school operation, it is necessary to examine what occurred during the previous year.

The present Leadership Team began its operation in July, 1965. The principal and the instructional consultant were new to the district, while the pupil personnel consultant had been associated with the building since its opening in 1953, serving as a guidance counselor, then as a vice-principal, and finally in her present capacity. According to all the information that could be gathered at the time from the superintendent and other district office personnel, the existing 7-8-9 junior high school was very traditional and not in step with the overall goals of the district. It was felt that a new leadership team could rejuvenate the staff and prepare it for the transition to a middle school the following year.

The months of July and August, 1965, were spent in becoming familiar with the folders of the teachers that would be attending our building workshop during the last week in August, and in developing an organizational structure that would allow creative teachers to embark on ventures that they were not previously able to attempt. Keeping in mind the basic goals of the district and our own personal philosophies, it was decided by our leadership team to go to a modified teaming structure that would be an initial step towards the eventual interdisciplinary teaming of students and teachers.

With an anticipated enrollment of 850 pupils, the Liverpool Board of Education had approved 49 staff positions for the 1965-1966 school year. The actual composition of the staff can be seen in Table I. With some basic information regarding:

1. The number of students at each grade level, and
2. The previous backgrounds and experiences of our teachers, a schedule was devised that would allow for team planning, team teaching, and the multiage grouping of students for instructional purposes in the areas of English, Social Studies, Mathematics and Science. Such flexibility had not previously been present, but it was felt that such an arrangement would provide staff with the structure some teachers needed in order to operate comfortably, while at the same time offering many opportunities for others to experiment. (*See* Table I.)

As a result of the one week summer workshop which thirty staff members attended, six teams were established.

1. A 9th level English—Social Studies team
2. An 8th level English—Social Studies team
3. A 7th level English—Social Studies team
4. A Mathematics team
5. A Science team
6. A Foreign Language team

For a more detailed analysis of the composition of these teams consult Table II. This will indicate the balance that we tried to create within each team. The arrangement seemed to have definite possibilities. (*See* Table II.)

As the school year began, the teams with the information supplied by the guidance counselors, began to group their students, mainly along the lines of previous academic success. A master schedule was developed (*see* Tables III and IV) which programmed students into certain time-slots with teams for instructional purposes. Staff was encouraged to make intelligent use of their time with students and to depart from the traditional 45 minute period each and every day, varying the length of the periods for specific reasons. A 16 module scheduling arrangement was developed to facilitate such flexibility, each module being 20 minutes. Common planning rooms and periods were established for every team. But as might be expected with only two months of planning and a limited amount of first-hand experience with the staff, all did not go as we had hoped. The problems that were anticipated began to materialize.

Some of the major problems, and these occurred with some teams but not with others, observed during the first few months of our junior high teaming operation were:

1. *Team isolationism.* Each team became a closed corporation and there was little if any exchange of information among teams.

2. *Friction within teams.* The idea balance between new and experienced personnel was creating problems. There was frequent conflict between the "traditionalists" and the "experimentalists." Each was trying to dominate the other and an exchange of ideas or a discussion of theories took on the aspects of a personal crusade. Needless to say this led to cliques, freeze-outs and rifts.

Table I

1965-1966 Junior High Staff

Position	*Number*	*Experience*		
		*R**	*NS***	*NBT****
English	8	5	2	1
Social Studies	8	4	2	2
Mathematics	7	6	1	–
Science	6	2	2	2
Foreign Langauge	5	2	–	3
Home Economics	2	2	–	–
Industrial Arts	2	2	–	–
Reading	1	–	1	–
Art	1	1	–	–
Music	1	–	–	1
Physical Education	2	1	1	–
Librarian	1	1	–	–
Music-Teacher	1	1	–	–
Guidance Counselor	1	–	1	–
Leadership Team	3	1	2	–
TOTAL	49	28	12	9

*R**—returning to our junior high school for another year.
*NS***—new to the staff, but with previous teaching experience in other schools.
*NBT****—a new, beginning teacher with no previous experience.

Table II

11965-1966 Junior High School Teams

Levels	*Team*	*Staff*	*Experience*		
			*R**	*NS***	*NBT****
9	English	2	1	1	–
	Social Studies	2	1	1	–
8	English	3	1	1	1
	Social Studies	3	2	1	–
7	English	3	3	–	–
	Social Studies	3	1	–	2
7-8-9	Science	6	2	2	2
7-8-9	Mathematics	7	6	1	–
7-8-9	French	3	2	–	1
	Spanish	1	–	–	1
	French-Spanish	1	–	–	1
	Total	34	19	7	8

*R**—returning to our junior high school for another year.
*NS***—new to the staff, but with previous teaching experience in other schools.
*NBT****—a new, beginning teacher with no previous experience.

Table III

1965-1966 Junior High School Modular Schedule
for
English and Social Studies

Module	*Level 9*	*Level 8*	*Level 7*
3	English	English	English
4	English	English	English
5	Social Studies	Social Studies	Social Studies
6	Social Studies	Social Studies	Social Studies
13	English	English	English
14	English	English	English
15	Social Studies	Social Studies	Social Studies
16	Social Studies	Social Studies	Social Studies

With the above schedule listing modules 3-6 in the A.M. and modules 13-16 in the P. M., there was room for regulating the lengths of classes in the vertical framework. It was also possible to team and regroup among the different teams within the horizontal 7-8-9 structure.

Table IV

1965-1966 Junior High School Modular Schedule
for
Mathematics and Science

Module	*Subject*	*Level*	*Subject*	*Level*
1	Mathematics	7	Science	7
2	Mathematics	7	Science	7
3	Mathematics	7		
4	Mathematics	7		
5	Mathematics	8	Science	9
6	Mathematics	8	Science	9
7			Science	9
8			Science	9
9	Mathematics	9	Science	8
10	Mathematics	9	Science	8
11	Mathematics	9	Science	8
12	Mathematics	9	Science	8
13	Mathematics	8		
14	Mathematics	8		
15			Science	7
16			Science	7

3. A *curriculum-oriented outlook* by many of the staff. The teachers were, for the most part, concentrating on their own subject matter and were generally unaware of the material being studied by their students in the other discipline areas.

4. *An unwillingness to regroup* students if it meant that they would have to shift to another teacher. This was caused in part by the master schedule created by the administration and also by the inflexible schedule that the teams arranged. Once each team had established a pattern of operation, it was rather reluctant to depart from it. There was also very little regrouping done within the confines of the individual classrooms.

5. *Innovation without evaluation.* There were a few individuals who attempted team teaching or independent study programs without really considering if this was the best method to employ, or without evaluating its effectiveness.

These five problems were the key ones faced during the year. Perhaps in some ways they could have been solved prior to the opening of school, or at least by certain administrative directives once they were detected, but our Leadership Team was committed to working closely with staff in helping them to solve their own problems. From what transpired during the remainder of the year and what has occurred in our middle school program, it appears as if this was the wisest approach, although certainly not the most rapid.

Progress During the First Year

Although there were problems, significant gains were made by students and staff during the 1965-1966 school year.

1. The limited teaming operation was of benefit to many new teachers. They learned a great many "tricks of the trade" from the more experienced members of the team and this enabled them to avoid many of the frustrations that new teachers face in the September rush.

2. A number of veteran teachers were shaken by some of the thoughts and ideas expressed by the most recent additions to the staff. Although some immediately withdrew from the battlefield, others began to reexamine their positions in view of these challenges, and to develop rationale either for adhering to their old ways of doing things or for attempting some new approaches.

3. There were some excellent discussions and exchanges of ideas between members of the same teams.

4. As the year progressed there was more regrouping of students taking place within the various teams, and solely on academic grounds.

5. Those teams that were experiencing the greatest internal conflicts at the start of the year resolved many of these problems with a minimum of direction from the Leadership Team, and became cohesive units.

6. English and Social Studies were being integrated. Several teachers on various teams were teaching *both* English and Social Studies and were, to some extent, no longer subject matter specialists in one discipline area.

7. There was a definite attempt to launch independent study programs and to use large group instruction (70-90 students) when appropriate.

8. Certain staff members, of their own accord, would meet with various members of the Leadership Team to discuss the school's philosophy and to seriously question why it should be implemented and then, if convinced, how it could be implemented.

9. A realization by staff that they were unaware of what was going on in the other teams and in the other subject matter areas with their students. This paved the way for exploration of the interdisciplinary teaming concept.

10. A firm belief in the integrity of the Leadership Team and its commitment to better education, without necessarily accepting all of its basic tenets.

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